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The U.S. can learn from Iran

By Don Cook

TEHRAN, Iran — There is something incongruous about boarding a huge Air France jet in Paris in the company of an aging, bearded, Moslem religious zealot — who was born before man could fly — to be transported to the teeming confusion of the Iranian capital to report a revolution.

But there is nothing incongruous about what is going on here. Raw, on-rushing history is being made in the streets of Tehran by the exuberant masses, and the mood can change in a flash from heady excitement to frenzied violence. It will be weeks before Iran settles down, and months before the political, economic, strategic and religious shock waves of this revolution have been absorbed by the rest of the world.

This is a far more cataclysmic, far more fundamental upheaval than the only other comparable Mideastern event in modern times. That was the Egyptian revolution of 1952, when Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser and a clique of young officers deposed King Farouk and unleashed a wave of Arab nationalism.

But that was a different Arab world a quarter of a century ago, and although the Nasser revolt gave vent to political force and feeling, it did not change very much in the social or economic structures. Farouk departed, the British left, the symbols of the old order were done away with, but the harsh, insoluble realities of economic life remained to fester.

The Iranian revolution is taking place in the context of totally different economic conditions, and the political, religious and moral forces behind it run far deeper in the nation than the impulses that led Nasser to overthrow Farouk. And, important as the Suez Canal seemed to be to the world in 1952, its significance was marginal in comparison to the importance of Iran's oil and the country's key position on the border of the Soviet Union in the geopolitical considerations of the world of 1979.

The Nasser revolution was a small, inside, conspiratorial affair organized in deep secrecy and gleefully supported by the U.S. Central Intelli-

gence Agency, which did not much like Farouk and was anxious to be on the right side when things blew. But in Iran, the CIA and the American government has been determinedly and blindly on the other side.

The Iranian revolution, led by the 78-year-old Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is a mass uprising of the people that the CIA never saw coming.

It may be a revolution that does not know where it is going, but it knows where it has been and what it is determined to overthrow.

Right now it is moving like a typhoon, sucking everything into its destructive path.

Of course, there are educated moderates in Iran who are deeply concerned about what this Islamic revolutionary republic would turn out to be. They know that it will be reactionary, puritanical, moralistic, with strict Moslem religious precepts as its guiding force. This will mean an end in Iran to hedonistic living — night clubs, bikinis, alcohol, libertine films and magazines and coeducation, at least up to high school levels.

This, however, is only the superficial aspect of Islamic rule and, after all, the United States survived 13 years of national prohibition, so why shouldn't Iran? The greater worry of the educated moderates lies in how Islamic rule will cope with the complexities of present-day economic realities, how the transformation of Iran into a strong, modern, viable state is going to be carried forward.

Many Iranians are asking these questions, but there are no answers and there will be no answers until the new system is in place and begins to work out the answers.

Whatever the worries of the moderates, they have no real choice except to ride this revolutionary wave with the masses and hope that they don't get swamped or dumped off their surfboard before it hits the beach. There is, they feel, no reason why Iran cannot be an Islamic republic with a strong religious foundation and at the same time an efficient, equitable, modern economic structure. But how to achieve this is another matter.

A prominent, intelligent Iranian lawyer who has courageously defended opponents of the shah for the last 15 years, commented the other day that "90 percent of the Iranians are completely indifferent to what the new constitution for an Islamic government will say — all they care about is that there has got to be a change."

The crumbling of the U.S. position in Iran is not quite the same costly disaster as Vietnam, but it is another heavy setback for the same kind of American intellectual approach, the same kind of policymaking that led to Vietnam.

The United States has poured in arms by the billions (paid for by the shah in hard cash), technicians by the thousands, contractors and intelligence experts, but somehow the United States has totally missed tuning in with the people and the deeper aspirations of the nation. Iran was made to fit an American stereotype picture of an anti-Communist bastion and, with the shah's help, everything was so arranged.

The worst the United States could do now would be to swing to the opposite extreme in its view of Iran — and write the country off the way Henry Kissinger was prepared to write off Portugal in 1973. Simply because the shah's brand of anti-communism has been overturned here, and \$7 billion in American military orders have been canceled, does not mean that Khomeini is handing his country over to the Communists.

There is much for the United States to learn from events in Iran — for what is happening here could certainly happen elsewhere in the Middle East. As soon as the present phase of the Iranian crisis shakes out and a different government is installed, it will be imperative to send in a new U.S. Embassy team under a new ambassador, who can start with a clean slate on what will have to be an entirely new relationship.

It is not going to be easy to sort this out, but it is not impossible and, in any case, there is no point in going into a sulk over what has happened to the American position here.

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